

Gerard written while
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Gerard Manley Hopkins' "terrible" Sonnets In the mid 1800's a very spiritual poet was born. Gerard Manley Hopkins was born July 28, 1844 to Manley and Catherine (Smith) Hopkins, the first of their nine children (Drabble 473). His parents were High Church Anglicans, and his father had just published a volume of poetry the year before (Drabble 473). He was ordained as a Jesuit priest who wrote beautiful poetry full of thoughts of nature and harmony. Hopkins poetry was, for the most part, published after his death in 1889.

Five years before Hopkins death he wrote six "terrible" sonnets revealing his inner torment and separation from God (Davie 86). These poems were written while Hopkins worked as a professor at University College, Dublin (Drabble 474). Hopkins' sonnets "No Worst, there is none" and "I wake and feel the fell of Dark, Not Day" show his mental anguish caused by spiritual agony. His job as a professor at University College required the grading of 500 examination papers, each one several pages of uninspired student translations, five to six times a year (Benzel 370). His job demanded long hours which took away time for his admiration of nature and his time for prayer. The six "terrible" sonnets have a strong contradiction to his earlier works. His early works were filled with beautiful scenes in nature and praise of God.

His realization that he was not dedicating enough time to God allowed him to see how many other people lose sight of God. This and other experiences during the time while he wrote his "terrible" sonnets allow us to assume that the poems are his own religious confessions. "More important, however, was his sense that his prayers no longer reached God" (Benzel 371).

Hopkins life-long best friend Robert Bridges received several letters from Hopkins while he wrote the “terrible” sonnets. Hopkins wrote to Bridges that the sonnets “came to him like inspirations unbidden and against my will” (Leavis 5296). Hopkins saw in his poems the fragmentation of his capacity to represent his Christian vision adequately. Hopkins considered this poetry the “wrong” kind of poetry because the sonnets did not “manifest that penetrating delineation, that inscaping of Christ in nature which had formerly been his joy” (Leavis 5297). Though Hopkins felt these poems were “wrong” and unwanted he also named them “inspirations” which meant that he recognized their poetic merit and their spiritual worth.

His recognition of his losing touch with God in nature is a way of asking God for forgiveness (Leavis 5297). The sonnet “No worst, there is none” reveals Hopkins’ lowest pit of desolation and inner torment caused from his distance with God. Mariani notes the sonnet only contains only a few images of nature and is all darkness. The sonnet can be divided into two parts. The first ten lines of the poem present his despair. Lines one and two “No worst there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief / More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring” (ll. 1-2), reveal “he has touched bottom: Hopkins, like a violin string, is strung tighter to play at the higher, more piercing and metallic tone of grief” (Mariani 59).

Line one “suggest an inexpressible degree of pain” (Benzel 382). Line two “turns the grief into something horrifyingly active.” Lines three and four “Comforter, where, where is your comforting? / Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?” (ll. 3-4), almost admonishes the Blessed Virgin and the comforter, who is Christ as well as the Holy Spirit, for not coming to his aid.

Line six “ woe, world sorrow; on a age-old anvil wince and sing”, “ is Hopkins’ terrifying realization that man, rebellious creature, is unworthy of God’s concern” (Mariani 60). In line six “ The anvil wincing and singing and fury’s shrieking force the sense of physical pain on us again and turn the screw tighter” (Benzel 382).

Line nine and ten “ O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap” (ll. 9-10), refer to man’s original fall and severance from God. The last few lines uncover Hopkins relief from his despair. These lines portray Hopkins anguish by his admitting to looking forward to